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ABSTRACT

This study found that, prior to beginning school, the typical adult female student at Montclair State College reports moderately positive support from her spouse. However, during the first semester, she encounters mild role conflict and lack of self-confidence in her ability to meet family and academic responsibilities. During her second and third semesters, her husband often resists the role changes which the first semester has revealed are necessary for her academic success. As a result, he withholds support, thereby causing her to suffer increasing time-management and role-conflict problems. However, if she perseveres through this period, her husband eventually develops new role expectancies for both of them and restores spousal support. Eventually, the force of previous socialization and current social pressures cause a consistent rise in power conflict. However, by this time, the student is strongly involved in academic success. Moreover, her own expectancies and those of her spouse are congruent. Both perceive her as individual-wife-mother-homemaker-student and the spouse as individual-husband-father-homemaker-wage earner. Therefore, spousal support and marital happiness remain high. (Author)

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Changes in the Conjugal Relationships of Adult Female Students

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Changes in the Conjugal Relationships of Adult Female Students

The number of adults attending universities and colleges is rapidly increasing. In fact, the Wall Street Journal projects that by 1980 forty percent of American undergraduates will be over age twenty-five (1977). This trend has had significant effects upon higher education. Over one third our colleges and universities now offer special programs for adults (Graulich, 1977). However, the author's interaction with adult students at Montclair State College indicated that the adult's return to college also had major univestigated effects upon family life which might explain the paradoxically high attrition rate among these students.

Initially the majority of female students state that their spouses encouraged their return to school. However, during the first or second semesters, students often request counseling to discuss the spouses' resentment of the time and energy devoted to college. In fact, many students indicate their spouses would like them to leave school. Frequently, a power conflict ensues. Eventually these conflicts are resolved. Sometimes the student separates from her spouse. More often, she resigns from school. Normally, the spouse adjusts in a manner which permits the student to remain in school without serious marital conflict.

It appears that the wife's participation on campus seems to threaten the spousal homeostasis. Often the woman has subserved her own intellectual, emotional and physical needs to those of her family (Brandenburg, 1974). However, to achieve academically she must cultivate her individual capacities and cater to her own needs. Consequently, housekeeping responsibilities are sacrificed and less time is devoted to the family. Conflict begins when the husband discovers that change on his spouse's part requires change on his part (Self, 1969; Brooks, 1976). When the wife attempts to explain her achievement needs and growing autonomy, familial tension often increase.

(Roach, 1976). Unfortunately, husbands and children equate the woman's growing independence with increased responsibilities and less attention for them. This paradigm is further complicated by the family's narrow perception of the woman as wife-mother-homemaker. As she becomes increasingly involved in academics, her behavior increasingly conflicts with familial expectations. Thus, husband and children react negatively towards the woman's school participation (Roach, 1976).

Resistance may take many forms from a sink full of unwashed dishes to demands for attention when the student is studying (Brooks, 1976). The woman who was initially encouraged by her family is now bewildered by their reactions. It becomes an intermeshed web which may seriously impeded academic functioning. In fact, family opposition has been found to be the most pressing problem for adult female students (Francisco, Note 1). Although families may not overtly object to the woman's pursuit of an education, they are unwilling to do their share of housekeeping because "that's mother's job".

A pilot study found that eighty percent of the married returning women at Montclair State College felt they had more household responsibilities than their spouses, while eighty-nine percent stated they believed both responsibilities and power should be evenly distributed between the spouses. It appears, what is reported as role-conflict, time management difficulties and low self-confidence may be surface manisfestations of more subtle problems: lack of spousal support and conjugal power conflict.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis I: Assertiveness and College Participation

As the female student moves from the role of wife-mother-homemaker to the role of scholar, her level of assertiveness will increase in direct relation to the extent of her college participation.

Hypothesis II: Spousal Support and College Participation

A. It is anticipated that initial spousal support will be moderately positive.

B. It is anticipated that spousal support will generally increase in direct relation to the extent of the student's college participation.

C. A low amount of spousal support is expected furing the second and third semesters as this is when the spouse recognizes that he must assume additional responsibilities if his wife is to succeed academically.

Hypothesis III: Spousal Support and Assertiveness

A direct relationship between assertiveness and spousal support is expected.

Hypothesis IV: Differences in Perceptions of Spousal Support

The female student and her spouse will be looking at spousal support from opposite reference points. Therefore, it is expected that the spouse will overestimate support while the student will underestimate it.

Hypothesis V: Marital Happiness and Spousal Support

A. Marital happiness is expected to be in an direct relationship with spousal support as reported by the student.

B. Marital happiness should be in a reciprocal relationship with the difference between the student's and spouse's reports of support. In other words, the greater the congruence between the student's and spouse's perceptions of support, the higher the level of marital happiness anticipated.

Hypothesis VI: Conjugal Power Conflict and College Participation

A. With spousal adjustment, conjugal conflict is expected to decrease in direct relation to the extent of the student's college participation on an overall basis.

B. Conjugal power conflict is expected to be in a reciprocal relationship with spousal support.

Hypothesis VII: Marital Happiness and Conjugal Conflict

It is expected that marital happiness will be in a reciprocal relationship with conjugal power conflict.

Method

Thiss was a cross sectional study with spousal support, assertiveness, conjugal conflict and marital happiness measured in subjects at various stages in their academic careers. Statistical procedures employed for evaluation were canonical correlation and multiple regression. Where indicated, one way analysis of variance and post hoc tests were performed.

Sampling

Three hundred subjects were randomly selected from the total population of married Second Career students enrolled at or accepted for admission to Montclair State College for the fall of 1977. Bach subject was contacted by mail. Instructions requested that both the students and their spouses complete the questionnaires.

The final sample of respondents included thirteen males and eighty-three females and their respective spouses. The male students and their spouses served as a control group with which to compare and contrast trends revealed by the female data.

General Questionnaires

These requested demographic information such as age, sex, number of college credits, number of CLEP credits and semesters completed.

Measuring Assertiveness

Rathus' 30 itme schedule for assessing assertive behavior was employed (Rathus, 1973) for evaluating the student's self-perceptions. A modified version was employed to assess the spouse's perceptions of the student's assertiveness.

Measuring Spousal Support

A measure of spousal support was developed based upon the spousal

actions which adult students consistently mentioned as helping or hindering their school participation. This was a twenty item schedule with a Likert scale ranging from +3 to -3. The possible range of scores was +60 to -60. The student and spouse completed equivalent versions of the schedule.

Measuring Marital Happiness

Included in the spousal support scale were two questions which assessed marital happiness and which were scored separately. These employed the same Likert scale as the spousal support measure.

Measuring Conjugal Power Conflict

To measure power conflict between spouses a scale similar to that used by Blood and Wolfe (1960) was developed. The measure employes twelve short stories. In some cases, the wife is employed full-time or part-time. In other cases she is unemployed. The same is true for husbands. Some couples have pre-school children, some school children, some adult children and some are childless. The stories are counter balanced for type of employment, who resume school, the number and ages of children such tat these factors do not influence the overall determination of who is given decision making power. Both the student and spouse are given the same scale, from which two scores are computed: general pwer conflict and situational power conflict.

Results

Hypothesis I: Assertiveness and College Participation

The female student's level of assertiveness did increase in direct relation to the extend of the student's college participation. This was relected in a .251 ($p < .05$) correlation between the total number of credits completed and the student's assertiveness reported by the student. It was confirmed by a .278 ($p < .05$) correlation between the number of college credits completed and the student's level of assertiveness as reported by the student. It was reconfirmed by a .289 correlation between the student's assertiveness as reported by the spouse and the total number of credits

(p .001) and by a .247 correlation between college credits completed and assertiveness reported by the spouse. Conversely, in the comparison group there was no indication of a relationship between assertieness and college participation.

Hypothesis II: Spousal Support and College Participation

A. For female students the overall mean support--reported by the student--was 10.66 with a standard deviation of 25.17. The reported mean for the semester prior to college was 11.40 with a standard deviation of 16.44 (See Table 1). Therefore, initial support was moderately positive as anticipated.

B. The amount of spousal support received by female students increased in direct relation to the amount of college participation. This was indicated by a .321 correlation ($p<.01$) between the number of college credits completed and spousal support reported by the student. A .324 correlation ($p<.001$) between spousal support reported by the student and the number of semesters completed confirmed this hypothesis. In addition, a .311 correlation $p<.01$) between spousal support reported by the spouse and the number of semesters completed, solidly reconfirms the fact that spousal support for female students generally increases in direct relation to the amount of college participation. There was no evidence of a similar trend in the the comparison group.

C. As predicted, spousal support--as reported by the student--followed a curvilinear trend. Support is moderately high for the semester prior to school, drops during the first three semesters, then rises again (See Figure 1). An analysis of variance (See Table 1) revealed significant differences among the eight groups ($p<.05$). Moreover, Duncan's Multiple Range Test reveals reported spousal support for semesters one, two and three to be significantly lower ($p<.05$) than support reported during semesters seven and eight (See Table 2). Thus there is a clear lull in spousal support--especially during

Table 1

Spousal Support for Eighty-Three Females

Semester	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation
0	5	11.4000	16.4408
1	12	5.8333	22.1106
2	12	-1.9167	24.5818
3	8	-3.6250	21.8628
4	11	7.1818	21.8624
5	9	11.2222	27.5171
6	12	23.0833	25.3967
8	14	25.2143	26.0182

Analysis of Variance

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F
Between Groups	8766.4141	7	1252.3447	2.1750*
Within Groups	43184.0430	75	575.7871	
Total	51950.4570	82		

*p<.05

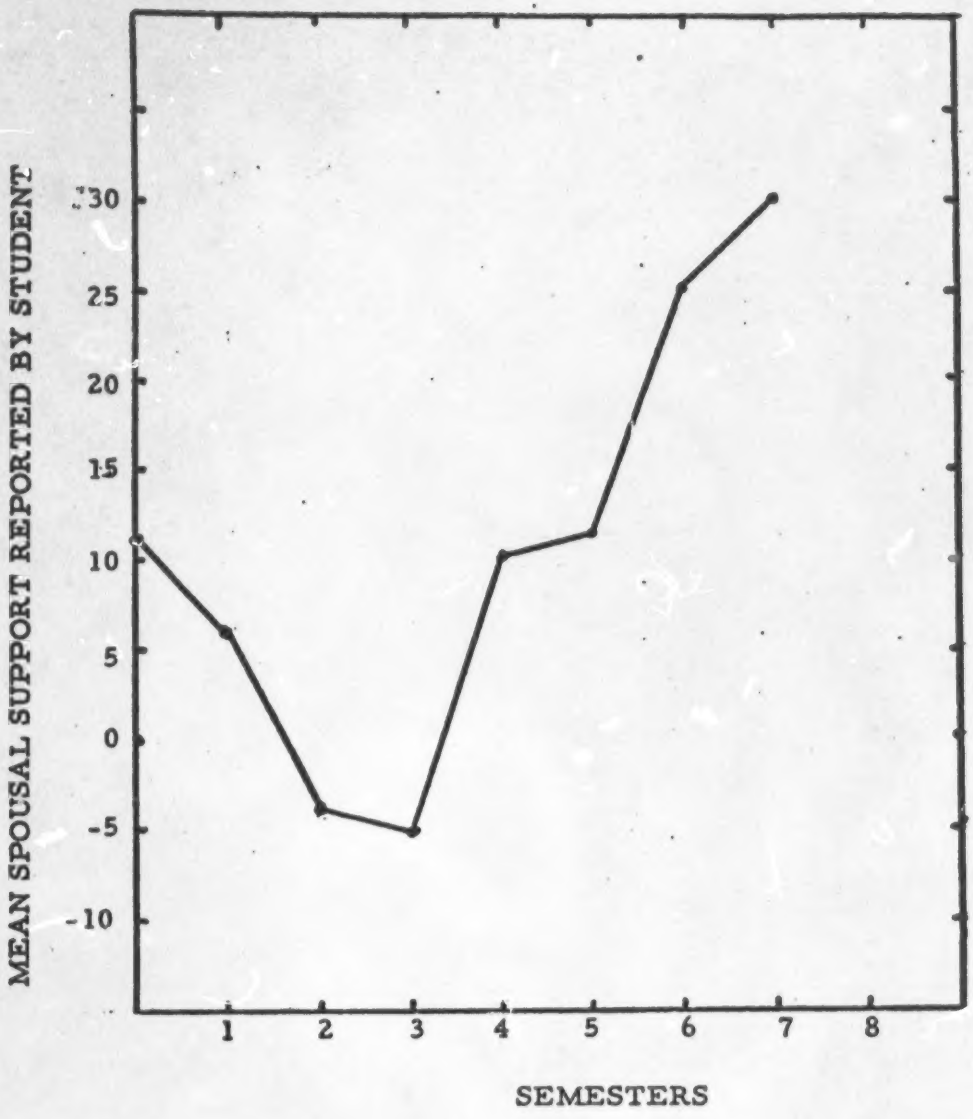

Figure 1. Mean spousal support for eighty-three females according to semester.

Table 2

Duncan's Multiple Range Test

for Spousal Support for Eighty-Three Females

Mean		Mean	Difference
(Semester 1) 5.8333	minus (Semester 8)	25.2143	= 19.3810
(Critical Difference = 12.98, $p < .01$)			
(Semester 2)-1.9167	minus (Semester 3)	25.2143	= 27.1310
(Critical Difference = 18.85, $p < .05$)			
(Semester 3) -3.6250	minus (Semester 8)	25.2143	= 28.8393
(Critical Difference = 24.63, $p < .05$)			
(Semester 2)-1.9167	minus (Semester 7)	23.0833	= 25.0000
(Critical Difference = 22.38, $p < .05$)			
(Semester 3)-3.6250	minus (Semester 7)	23.0833	= 26.7083
(Critical Difference = 25.04, $p < .05$)			

the second and third semesters--followed by a significant increase.

Hypothesis III: Spousal Support and Assertiveness

Student assertiveness as reported by the student and spousal support as reported by the student have a positive correlation of .233 ($p<.05$). This confirms the hypothesis that student assertiveness increases concurrently with spousal support. However, the same relationship is evident for male students (.888, $p<.001$) even though neither their assertiveness nor spousal support increases as a function of college participation. It appears, the more assertive the student, the more spousal support expected and received.

Hypothesis IV: Differences in Perceptions of Spousal Support

A. Spousal support as reported by the female student and the difference in the spouse's and student's perceptions of support are negatively correlated (-.494, p .001). Conversely, the spousal support reported by the husband and the difference in the spouse's and students' perceptions of support have a positive relationship with a correlation coefficient of .327 (p .01). In essence, the spouse consistently reports giving greater amounts of support than the student reports receiving.

For male students, support reported by the spouse and the difference in support were also positively correlated (.654, $p<.05$) indicating the greater the support reported by the spouse, the less congruence between the student's and spouse's perceptions of support. Conversely, there was a directional tendency for the male student to underestimate the support received, however, this tendency was not statistically significant.

Hypothesis V: Marital Happiness and Spousal Support

A. The hypothesis that marital happiness would be in a direct relationship with spousal support for female students was confirmed by the high correlation (.477, $p<.001$) between these variables. Similarly, for male students marital happiness is in a direct relationship with spousal

support as reported by the student (.689, $p<.01$).

B. For female students, marital happiness is in a reciprocal relationship with the difference in the student's and spouse's perceptions of support (-282, $p<.05$). Apparently, marital happiness may remain high so long as the student and her spouse are in agreement concerning the amount of support considered appropriate.

The crucial factors contributing to the marital happiness of couples--where the female is a returning student--appears to be the amount of support the student perceives her spouse to be giving and the degree of congruence between her and her husband's perceptions. Conversely, if the male student does not perceive himself to be receiving a large amount of support marital happiness is low.

Hypothesis VI: Conjugal Power Conflict and College Participation

A. There was no linear relationship between conjugal power conflict and college participation for either female or male students.

B. For female students there was a decrease in conjugal conflict during the first and second semesters. However, as evident in figure 2, there was an even greater decrease in conjugal conflict during semester four; followed by a gradual increase in conflict thereafter.

An analysis of variance (See Table 3) revealed differences among the eight groups which are significant at the .01 level. The Duncan's Multiple Range Test (See Table 4) further indicates that situational power conflict during the semester prior to school through the third semester is significantly higher than it is during semesters four and five. Moreover, situational power conflict during semester eight is significantly higher than it is during semester four. Power conflict is a curvilinear function which is high the first three semesters, drops during semesters four and five, and rises thereafter.

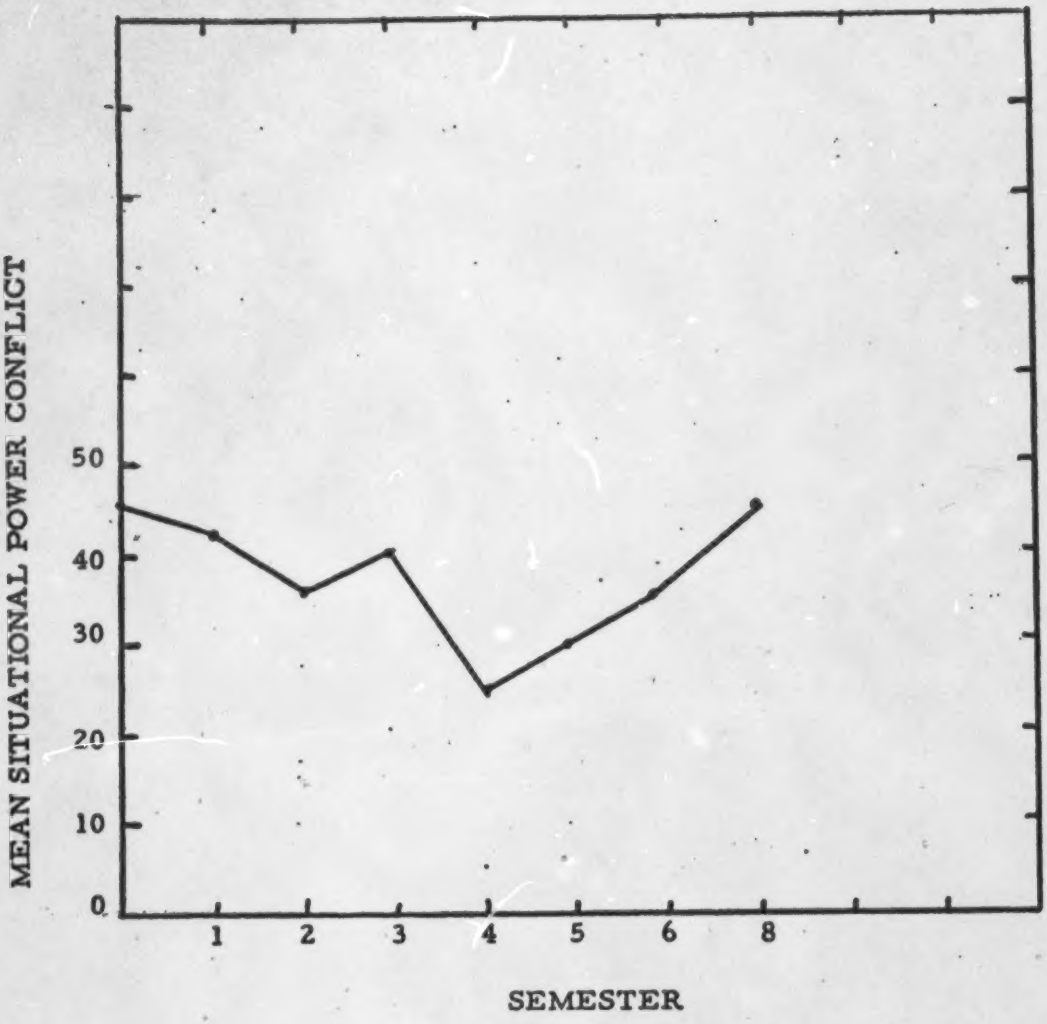

Figure 2. Situational power conflict for eighty-three females and their spouses.

Table 3

Situational Power Conflict for Eighty-Three Females

Semester	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation
0	5	47.8000	20.5840
1	12	44.0833	16.9944
2	12	37.9167	12.7097
3	8	43.1250	11.5565
4	11	24.2727	15.1399
5	9	29.7778	12.5974
6	12	37.5000	8.2186
8	14	40.0000	13.1559

Analysis of Variance

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F
Between Groups	3854.4727	7	550.6389	2.9210*
Within Groups	14138.2383	75	188.5098	
Total	17992.7109	82		

*$p < .01$

Table 4

Duncan's Multiple Range Test

for Situational Power Conflict for Eighty-Three Females

Mean		Mean	Difference
(Semester 0) 47.8000	minus (Semester 4)	24.2727	= 23.5273
(Critical Difference = 21.03, $p < .01$)			
(Semester 0) 47.8000	minus (Semester 5)	29.7778	= 18.0222
(Critical Difference = 16.12, $p < .05$)			
(Semester 1) 44.0833	minus (Semester 4)	24.2727	= 19.8106
(Critical Difference = 16.24, $p < .01$)			
(Semester 3) 43.1250	minus (Semester 4)	24.2727	= 18.8523
(Critical Difference = 14.60, $p < .05$)			
(Semester 8) 40.0000	minus (Semester 4)	24.2727	= 15.7273
(Critical Difference = 12.76, $p < .05$)			

Hypothesis VII: Marital Happiness and Conjugal Conflict

It was expected that marital happiness would be in a reciprocal relationship with the degree of general and situational power conflict. There are correlations in the predicted direction for both socres. However, these are not statistically significant.

Discussion

The present study has served to document that college does influence the interpersonal relationships of adult students. In fact, the relationships and trends revealed may be more psychologically significant than they appear. Those students experiencing the most marital difficulties concerning college participation frequently drop out of school, and therefore, were not included in this study. Moreover, the author received several phone calls and letter from women whose spouses would not permit them to participate in the study because of the conflict the wife's college participation was creating in the home.

Assertiveness and Spousal Support

One significant effect which college participation has upon the adult female student is that it functions to raise her level of assertiveness. College seems to teach the adult female student to express needs and desires which she had previously been ignoring or suppressing.

This study indicated that those women who resume college usually have positive spousal support prior to enrollment. However, spousal support increases concurrently with assertiveness. The more assertive the woman is, the better she communicates her actual needs and expectations, and the more spousal support she receives. The degree of spousal support is crucial in the determination of a woman's career aspirations and accomplishments (Arnott, 1972; Bailyn, 1966; 1972, 1974; Ginzberg, 1971; O'Leary, 1974; Rapoport et al, 1971). Moreover, spousal support appears to be especially important during the first few

semesters of college participation when the wife's involvement on campus alters the marital homeostasis. It is during these semesters, that the spouse realizes change in his wife's role necessitates change in his role (Self, 1969; Brooks, 1976). While he is assimilating this novel situation spousal support remains low. Considering the high attrition rate of adult students and the low amount of spousal support during this period, it may be advisable for counselors to offer additional support during this interval.

Fortunately, this lull in spousal support is temporary. The adulf female student is committed to obtaining an education. She is liberal and assertive (O'Connell, Note 2; Boty, 1966; Zatlin et al, 1973) and these characteristics are associated with spousal adjustment (Arnott, 1972; Fuchs, 1971; Glenn and Walters, 1966; Haller and Rosenmayr, 1971; Rapoport et al, 1971). Eventually, the husband assimilates and accomodates the necessary role changes and offers increasing amounts of spousal support.

As anticipated, the student consistently underestimated the amount of spousal support in reference to the spouse's perceptions. Conversely, the spouse consistently overestimated. Whether the spouse or student gave a more accurate report is irrelevant. The important fact is that the spouse believes himself to be giving more support than the student believes him to be giving. Moreover, the larger this discrepancy, the more likely that the couple will experience marital conflict concerning the student's college participation. The fact that marital happiness is in a reciprocal relationship with this discrepancy indicates that the resulting tension permeates the entire conjugal relationship.

Conjugal Power Conflict

College participation also has a significant effect upon conjugal power conflict. Disagreement over who should influence which decisions to what degree was high for the semester prior to college and remained high through the third semester. Power conflict remained constant for

the second and third semesters and decreased significantly during the fourth and fifth semester while spousal support was on the rise. It appears that the increased spousal support and the student's increasing assertiveness equip the couple to resolve some former differences concerning decision making power. Unfortunately, the decrease in decision making conflict is only temporary and power conflict rapidly increases to its original level.

It appears that the initial increase in spousal support opens the door for marital communication and cooperation. However, after a period of time, this "elation effect" wears off and tension builds as the woman continually fails to conform to the subordinate power role which her husband has been socialized to expect of her (Horner, 1970; Bem and Bem, 1970; Unger, Note 3; O'Leary, 1974). Once power conflict begins to increase, it is reinforced and perpetuated by sex-role stereotypes which encourage the husband to assume control of decision making situations. Support for this explanation is found in the fact that a similar trend is not evident for males. They were socizlized for success, competency, independence and decision making supremacy (Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson and Rosenkrantz, 1972; Unger, Note 3) and their spouses expect them to assume this role. Consequently, their continued college participation merely reaffirms their socially prized position.

To summate, college participation does have significant effects upon the adult female students marital relationships. What is often reported as role-conflict and time management difficulties seem to be related to changes in the spousal support and decision making systems which result from college participation. Moreover, changes in these systems may be contributing factors in the high attrition rates of adult female students.

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